

MYSTERIES of the Christian
Religion credible.

4475-aa-126

A

SERMON

Preach'd before the

University of OXFORD,

At St. MART'S,

On SUNDAY, October the 21st, 1722.

By JOHN CONYBEARE, D. D.

Rector of Exeter-College in OXFORD.

—[Let us] consider the Weakness of our Minds, and the Narrowness of our Capacities; and have but Humility enough to allow, that there may be many Things which we cannot fully comprehend; and that God is not bound in all he does to subject his Ways of Operation to the Scrutiny of our Thoughts, and confine himself to do nothing but what we must comprehend. Mr. Lock's Examination of Malebranche's Opinion, Sect. 2.

The THIRD EDITION.

L O N D O N:

Printed for S. WILMOT, Bookseller, in Oxford:
And sold by J. and J. Knapton, R. Knaplock, and
W. Innys, in St. Paul's Church-yard; and by S. Birt,
in Ave-Mary-Lane, London. 1732.

[Price Six-Pence.]

Imprimatur,

ROB. SHIPPEN,

Nov. 19,
1722.

Vice-Canc. O X O N.



S
U
—
F
of
Go
ou
Ru
it
fuc



A
S E R M O N

Preach'd before the
University of OXFORD.

1 C O R. xiii. 12.

*For now we see through a glass darkly,
but then face to face : Now I know
in part, but then shall I know even
as also I am-known.*



THESE Words represent to us the Imperfection of our present Conceptions in *Divine* Matters, and that more clear and full View of them which is reserv'd for the Happiness of another Life. In Compassion to us, indeed, God hath been pleas'd to aid the Infirmities of our Nature : To set before us the most excellent Rule of Life ; — To enforce the Observance of it by the greatest Sanctions ; --- And to propose such Truths to us, as (if duly attended to) will

A

yet

yet farther quicken us in our Duty : But still the Knowledge which hath been communicated to us is but *in part*. Light there is let in upon us answerable to the Necessities of our present State ; sufficient to guide us in the Ways of our Duty, and to bring us to an eternal Happiness : However, tho' God hath been pleased to relieve our Wants, he hath not gratify'd our Curiosity.

As yet *we see through a glass darkly* : Our intellectual Sight is aided indeed by the Revelation which hath been given us. We have a more clear, and better View of *some* Things than we had before ; and *others* do now appear to us, of which we had before no View at all : Notwithstanding this, our Conceptions are, in many Points, indistinct. Or rather, (as this Passage may be interpreted more agreeably with the Intention of the Apostle), our Knowledge in Divine Matters is not *direct* and *immediate*, but as it were by *Reflection*. These are often represented to us by some remote Resemblance they have with Things of Sense : And therefore, tho' our Knowledge of them be, as far as it goes, true ; yet must it be allow'd to be very short and imperfect.

Thus, as the Apostle expresses it, *we know but in part* ; and must be contented to do so, 'till *that which is perfect shall come*. In the mean time, it becomes us rather to be thankful that we know so much, than impatient that we know not more ; rather to improve to pious Purposes the Light which hath been given us, than to shut our Eyes to it, because it is not greater : Let us embrace with an humble Faith the great *Mysteries* of our Religion, and adore those Truths which we cannot comprehend.

This

Christian Religion credible.

3

This is, I conceive, the natural Result of such a Consideration ; but yet a quite different Use hath been made of it. There are some who have rejected our whole Religion, because it contains such Doctrines in it as are *incomprehensible* ; or, as they are pleas'd (tho' improperly) to term them, *unintelligible*. This is the Case of some of our modern *Deists* ; who, being unable to prove any Contradiction in our Religion, either express, or by consequence, urge, that they cannot be oblig'd, nor are able to give their Assent to any Doctrine which is incomprehensible.

But whatever Force may be thought to be in this way of Reasoning, yet must it be urg'd with a very ill Grace, by those who run themselves on greater Difficulties than they endeavour to avoid ; and this is the Case of those modern Infidels, who plead the Incomprehensibility of some of its Articles, as an Argument against the Truth of Christianity : For he who pretends to reject a Doctrine purely because he does not fully comprehend it, ought, for stronger Reasons, to admit a Religion, where he can't answer the Arguments on which 'tis built. If a Proposition is therefore to be exploded, because we have *inadequate* Ideas of its Parts, much more ought a Religion to be admitted, where the direct Proof of it is unanswerable. Our Adversaries should therefore shew where the direct Proof of our Religion fails : They should prove, either that the Facts alledg'd were Cheats, or insufficient to bear the Consequence deduced from them, But so long as these Points are untouch'd, our Religion will maintain its Ground, Mankind is not yet so far lost to the first Principles of Reason,

as to admit bare Difficulties against Demonstration ; nor are Persons of cool Sense to be persuaded, that the strongest Evidence, arising even from *clear* Ideas, is to be rejected, because in some Points our Notions may be *obscure*.

Of this the Followers of *Socinus* have been so sensible, that tho' labouring under the same unreasonable Prejudices against the Belief of *Mysteries*, they yet contend for the Truth of our Religion. The Method therefore in which they pretend to proceed, is this, *viz.* To search, whether those Passages of Scripture, on which several *mysterious* Doctrines have been built, may not be capable of a different Interpretation : And being before-hand resolv'd against any Interpretation which carries with it a *Mystery*, they have often fix'd on such, as is most remote from the common Acceptation of the Words, and most disagreeable with the main Scope of the Writer.

It shall be my present Endeavour to refute this pernicious Error ; and in order to it, I will,

First, State the Notion of a *Mystery* ; shewing withal, how far we maintain that our Assent is due to the Mysteries of *Christianity*.

Secondly, I will prove, that the *Mysteriousness* of these Doctrines is, of itself, no Argument against the receiving them : and consequently, that no Advantage can be taken from hence, either by the *Deist* on the one hand, or the *Socinian* on the other.

After which, I will, in the *Last Place*, make some proper Reflections upon the Whole.

I am

Christian Religion credible. 5

I am to begin with stating the Notion of a *Mystery*. It will not signify much to our present Purpose to carry our Enquiries so far back as the first Use of the Word ; — or whether it might not originally signify, *any sacred Rite or Doctrine*. It will be sufficient to remark, that the Word is here to be understood of *something hidden, or concealed* ; and accordingly, that by those who treat of this Subject it is generally understood, either of such Doctrines only, as were *wholly*, or *in part unknown*, 'till deliver'd by our Saviour and his Apostles ; — or of such as being reveal'd, we are still *incapable of comprehending*.

'Tis not to be denied but that the Word is often us'd in the former Sense, even in the holy Scriptures themselves : and if we understand it in this Sense only, the *Socinians* are ready to join with us ; allowing that the Christian Religion contains several mysterious Doctrines, if *mysterious* signifies nothing more, than Doctrines unknown 'till reveal'd.

The Point therefore, in which they differ from us, is this ; We affirm that there are several Doctrines *above our Reason* ; and which we are still incapable of comprehending, notwithstanding the Revelation which hath been made to us concerning them : They affirm, on the contrary, that there is nothing in the Christian Religion *above our Reason* ; nothing but what, by a due use of our Faculties, we are able to comprehend : And in consequence of this, they reject such Interpretations of Scripture, as carry with them any thing incomprehensible.

This then is what we mean by a *Mystery*, in the present Dispute, *viz.* A Doctrine which is so *above our Reason*, that we are *incapable of*
com-

comprehending it ; a Doctrine concerning which our Ideas are, either *inadequate*, or *indeterminate*; and therefore such, the Connexion of whose Parts we are incapable, in many Instances, of discerning ; or, at least, of answering numberless Questions that may be rais'd about them.

It will not be improper to make some more particular Remarks on this Account of a *Mystery*, as it will serve to clear the Way to the Second General Head, and to obviate the most material Difficulties which have been started on this Subject.

I observe, First, that the Term *Mysterious* hath a *relative* Sense ; and implies a Respect to that Person's Understanding, to whom a Thing is mysterious. There is no Doctrine *absolutely* and *in itself* mysterious ; *i. e.* There is no Doctrine above the Comprehension of *all* Understanding. All the several Agreements, Disagreements and Relations of Things are capable of being understood and comprehended. And since there is a Mind actually existing endu'd with *absolute* Knowledge, we are farther assur'd that they are actually understood and comprehended. It remains, that nothing is *in itself* mysterious ; and that whatever thinking Man uses the Term, he must understand it in a *relative* Sense.

It was therefore a mean Artifice in the Author of *Christianity not Mysterious*, to represent Divines as contending, * “ That there are some Christian Doctrines so mysterious, as to be *in themselves* inconceivable.” It is allow'd, that there are some by *Us* incomprehensible, but not *absolutely* and *in themselves* inconceivable.

* See Mr. Toland's *Christianity not Mysterious*, p. 72. Edit. 2. Lond. 1696.

Christian Religion credible. 7

Upon this *relative* Sense of the Word *Mystery* we may remark farther, that from hence appears the Difference between those Doctrines which are *Mysterious and above our Reason*, and those which are *contrary* to it. The former only imply a Disproportion between the Object and our intellectual Faculties ; and are therefore such as we can determine nothing particularly about, from barely considering the Things themselves : But the latter are so far level with our Capacities, that we plainly discern their Impossibility. And therefore there is as much Difference between them, as there is between *Light* and *Darkness*, between *seeing* and *not seeing*. -- To proceed ;

I have before observ'd, that by *Mysterious* Doctrines, we mean such, concerning which our Ideas are either *inadequate* or *indeterminate*. This Account supposes that of these mysterious Doctrines we have *some Ideas* ; we have *Ideas*, though such as are either *partial* or *indeterminate*.

Indeed, where we can frame *no* Ideas, we can, strictly speaking, give no Assent. For what is *Assent*, but a Perception, or at least a firm Persuasion, that the Extrems in a Proposition do agree, or disagree ? But where we have *no manner* of Ideas of these Extremes, we can have no such Perception, or Persuasion. And as no Combination of Terms *really insignificant*, can make a *real* Proposition ; so no Combination of Terms *to us perfectly unintelligible*, can, with respect *to us*, be accounted Propositions.

We do maintain therefore, that we have *some* Ideas even of *mysterious* Doctrines. And thus, I conceive, we are sufficiently guarded against an Objection sometimes made against us as contending for *unintelligible* Doctrines. There is a
vast

vast Difference between *unintelligible* and *incomprehensible*. That is, strictly speaking, *unintelligible*; concerning which we can frame *no* Ideas; and that only *incomprehensible*, concerning which our Ideas are *imperfect*. It is plain therefore, that a Doctrine may be Intelligible, and yet Incomprehensible.

Nay, I shall adventure to maintain, that there are several Propositions of whose Extreame we have Ideas, but are yet incapable of discerning how far these Extreame do agree, or disagree. For since this Agreement or Disagreement, is, in most Cases, to be prov'd by the Use of several *intermediate* Ideas; in all those Instances in which we fail of intermediate Ideas, we are incapable of discerning whether they do agree, or disagree. In all such Instances the Propositions are *intelligible*, and yet *incomprehensible*.

The *Incomprehensibility* therefore of certain Doctrines in our Religion does not arise from our having *no* Ideas of them; but from hence, that our Ideas are either *inadequate*, or *indeterminate*. I conceive it is very evident, that there may be *infinite Relations* of one thing to another, which, for want of adequate Ideas, will be to us *undiscernable*: But any Propositions, with respect to such undiscernable Relations, will, when propos'd, be to us *mysterious*: And consequently, those who explode *all Mysteries*, can maintain their Ground only by asserting, that *all* their Ideas are *adequate*: A Perfection which the sober part of Mankind will be very backward in allowing them.

Beside this, there are other Things concerning which our Ideas are *indeterminate*. The Importance of the Observation will best appear, by

Christian Religion credible. 9

by considering, that in those Revelations which God is pleas'd to make, he deals with us as Men, and does not produce in us any new Faculties, different from what we had before. If the Doctrines reveal'd are made up of such Ideas, as we are capable of receiving in the *ordinary* Methods of Knowledge, then the Revelation is, either a farther Enforcement of such Truths, as might *naturally* be known, or a Discovery of such Truths, as (for want of *adequate* Ideas) could *not* naturally be known. But it hath happen'd, in some Instances, that the Doctrines reveal'd are made up of such Ideas, as we are incapable of receiving in an *ordinary* way: Such are the Doctrines, concerning *The Generation of the Son of God: The Distinction between the Persons in the Ever-blessed Trinity*, and the like. In these Cases the Ideas are themselves *reveal'd*; —*reveal'd*, I say, *not* by producing in us any new Faculties of receiving them, but by representing them by some other Ideas, with which they have a remote *Resemblance* and *Analogy*.

And this Account, I presume, exactly agrees with what the Apostle delivers in the Words of my Text, *Now we see thro' a Glass*: Our present Knowledge of these Matters is not by Ideas, *immediately* deriv'd from the things themselves, but by such as are *analogous* to the things they represent. Thus we see as by *Reflection from a Glass*, not *Face to Face*.

Such *analogous* Ideas may, I conceive, be properly enough call'd *indeterminate*; as not *precisely* and *distinctly* representing the things they stand for. And if any Difficulty be made about this Expression, and it should be urg'd (as possi-

bly it may) that an *indeterminate* Idea is *no* Idea at all, I would desire to know, whether we have any Idea of *Substance*; and if it be allow'd that we have, whether This be any other than *indeterminate*; as being none other than the Idea of a certain unknown Support of *Accidents*, or *Modes*. But in those Doctrines of which our Ideas are *indeterminate*, 'tis no wonder if we are incapable, either of *discerning* their Truth from barely considering the things themselves; or of answering all Difficulties that may be rais'd about them.

From what hath been already offer'd, an Answer may be fram'd to an Objection sometimes made against us, *viz.* How can a thing be *reveal'd*, and yet *mysterious*? The *Truth* of the Proposition is *reveal'd*; The *Manner how* 'tis true may notwithstanding remain a Secret. We are certain that whatever God declares must be true; We may be certain that such or such Propositions have been declar'd by God; and if so, that there is a *real* Connection between the Parts of them, tho' (for want of *adequate*, or *determinate* Ideas) we may be incapable of *discerning* it. Thus we are certain, even from natural Arguments, that there can be but *One* Divine Nature; But it hath been declar'd in Scripture, that the *Father*, *Son*, and *Holy Ghost* are each of them distinctly *God*; and consequently, that these *Three* are *One*: The *Truth* of the Proposition is *reveal'd*; The *Manner how* it can be true, is still a *Mystery*.

And accordingly our Assent to such Propositions, is, a certain Persuasion that they are really *True*, tho' of themselves *inevident*; a Persuasion of their *Truth*, without concerning ourselves about the *Manner* of it. For since Faith

is

Christian Religion credible. 11

is founded on *Revelation*, we can be requir'd to believe a Thing no farther than 'tis *reveal'd*; And since this *Revelation* concerns only the *Truth* of the Proposition, 'tis plain that our Faith can reach no farther; And consequently, when we contend for believing the *Mysteries* of Religion, we mean no more than giving an Assent to those *Doctrines* which are mysterious; without requiring any thing *particular* to be believ'd concerning the *mysterious Part* of them, or the unknown *Manner* of their Truth.

I shall pass now to my

Second General Head, viz. To prove that the *Mysteriousness* of a religious Doctrine is, of itself, no sufficient Argument against receiving it. And this I shall endeavour, by resolving the *Denial* of religious Mysteries into its proper *Principles*; and by shewing that they are *unreasonable* and *absurd*.

Whosoever therefore rejects a religious Doctrine *purely* because it is *mysterious*, must proceed on one or other of these Principles; Either,

1. That whatsoever is mysterious is *false*; Or,
2. That we can have no sufficient Evidence that any *particular* Doctrine is *true*, which is mysterious; Or else,

3. That 'tis unreasonable to suppose that God should make any Doctrine a matter of *Revelation*, and as such necessary to be receiv'd, without giving us *clear*, and *adequate* Ideas of the Thing reveal'd.

For, if a Doctrine may be yet *true* notwithstanding its being mysterious: And if there may be *sufficient Evidence* of its Truth: And, Lastly, if there be nothing unreasonable in supposing

that a mysterious Doctrine should be matter of *Divine Revelation*, then the *Mysteriousness* of a religious Doctrine is no Argument against its being *receiv'd* as true.

I shall begin with examining the First Principle into which the *Denial* of Mysteries may be resolv'd, *viz.* That whatsoever is mysterious is *false*.

Let us take with us a Remark which I before offer'd, *viz.* That the Term *Mystery* hath a *relative* Sense, and implies a respect to that Person's Understanding to whom a thing is mysterious: It will appear from hence, that a Doctrine is so far to any Man *mysterious*, as he cannot, or does not comprehend it. And if a mysterious Doctrine be therefore *false*, These Consequences will follow; —That the Knowledge of the most *ignorant* Person is the Standard of Truth; —That there can be no *real* Difference in Men's intellectual Attainments; —and no *real* Progress made in Knowledge. For, if every mysterious Doctrine be *false*; and if every Doctrine not comprehended by the most *ignorant* Person be *to him* mysterious; then, every *such* Doctrine is false. It follows, that *all* Truth is by him comprehended; *i. e.* that *his* Understanding is the Measure of Truth; That no One Man can be *really* more knowing than another; and no Man *really* more knowing at One time, than at another. —So fruitful is one Absurdity of many more!

But our Adversaries will perhaps hope to save all by a Retreat; and tell us, that by *Mystery* is not to be understood any Doctrine actually *not comprehended* by Man; but such only as is *incomprehensible* by Man; and, that whatsoever is incom-

incomprehensible by Man, must be false. The Reply to this is obvious :

1. Many things may be incomprehensible by us in *this* State, which may be easily comprehended by us in a *future* State of more perfect Knowledge ; as there are many things incomprehensible by us in a State of *Childhood*, which are easily comprehended in our *riper* Age : And therefore, the *present* Incomprehensibility of things is no Argument against their Truth.

Again ; The least Acquaintance with the World must assure us, that there is a Difference of Parts in different Men ; or, that there is in them a different *Capacity* of Knowledge. It will be readily allow'd by any thinking Man, that there are a vast Number of Persons *incapable*, by the utmost Labour and Study, of entering into all the deep Reasonings of a Mathematician : 'Tis certain then, that there are many Truths actually *comprehended* by some Men, which are by others *incomprehensible*. But we can as easily conceive an Order of Beings superior to the *wisest* Men in Knowledge, as conceive *some* Men superior to *other* Men in Knowledge : And if what is incomprehensible by *some* Men may be comprehensible by *others*, then what is incomprehensible by *all* Men, may be comprehensible by other *superior* Beings.

Add to this, that as Creatures we must be *dependent* and *finite* ; and that whatsoever is finite in its *Nature*, must be finite in its *Attributes*. The Consequence will be, that every Creature must be bounded in its *Capacity of Knowledge*. Or thus ; No Being can be endu'd with absolute *Knowledge*, unless it be endu'd with absolute *Perfection* : And no Being can be endu'd with
abso-

absolute Perfection, but the *Supreme self-existent* Being. From hence it follows, that there must be an infinite Number of Truths actually *comprehended* by the Self-existent Being, and yet *incomprehensible* by the most perfect Creature; *i. e.* There must be an infinite Number of Truths to us mysterious.

To assert therefore, that whatever is incomprehensible by us is *false*, is in effect to assert, that *all* Truth is by us comprehensible; that we are capable of being *equal* to God in *Knowledge*; and consequently, in *every other* Perfection; since 'tis necessary that where one Perfection is in an *infinite* Degree, there *all others* must be so too.—But I will not any farther pursue the Impiety and Absurdity into which this monstrous Principle will lead us. Let us proceed rather to examine the

Second Principle into which the *Denial* of Mysteries may be resolv'd, *viz.* That we can have no sufficient Evidence, that any *particular* Doctrine is *true*, which is mysterious.

In Opposition to this I do maintain,

First, That we may have *demonstrative* Evidence of the Truth of some Propositions, concerning which very perplexing Difficulties may be rais'd; and so, may have the strongest Proof that some things *are*, and yet be utterly incapable of comprehending the *manner how* the things so prov'd can be; *i. e.* we may have, in some Cases, *demonstrative* Evidence of Doctrines mysterious.

It is a Point capable of rigid Demonstration, that Matter is not a *necessarily Existing* Being, nor *Eternal*: It must therefore have been, strictly speaking, *Created*: And yet we are incapable of

com-

Christian Religion credible. 15

comprehending the *manner* how a thing can be created.

We are, I conceive, very certain, that mere Matter is incapable of any *active* Powers; and consequently, can't put itself into Motion. Whenever therefore it is put in Motion, it must be acted upon, either *immediately*, or *mediately* by some other Being which is *immaterial*. But who can frame a Notion how an *immaterial* Being can act upon that which is *material*?

Farther; 'Tis capable of certain Proof, that whatever Being is endu'd with *absolute* Knowledge, must be endu'd with a *certain Fore-knowledge* of all future Events. For, whatever certainly exists at *any* time, may at *that* Time be the Object of *certain Knowledge*: — Whatever at any Time *certainly* exists, was from all Eternity *certainly future*: — And whatever was from Eternity *certainly future*, might from Eternity be *certainly foreknown*. The Consequence is plain, that God, as being endu'd with *absolute* Knowledge, must be endu'd with a *certain Fore-knowledge* of all future Events. 'Tis on the other hand certain, that we have a *Liberty of Action*. This we experience in ourselves; and whatever Arguments are urg'd against it, will equally conclude against placing Liberty in *any other* Being; and yet 'tis strictly demonstrable, that there must be Liberty somewhere or other. But whosoever shall attempt to clear up *all* Difficulties about these Truths, and *distinctly* to reconcile them with each other, will find himself engag'd in an insuperable Work. We can't conceive how a thing can be *certainly* foreknown, and yet *contingent*; how a thing can be *certainly* future, and yet such as *may* be, or *may not* be. The Points
how-

however before-mention'd are doubtless *really* consistent with each other: And the appearing Difficulties about reconciling them arise from nothing but our present *imperfect* Views of things.

But beside those mysterious Truths, which we are capable of demonstrating, there are others concerning which we may have sufficient Evidence even from *human* Testimony. For we may, by this Method, have sufficient Evidence of some Truths, which we do not *comprehend*; and which are therefore so far to *us* mysterious. Can a Man be justly blam'd for assenting to the Truth of a *Mathematical* Proposition, tho' by him not comprehended, upon the Testimony of Persons of allow'd Skill in that Science? It can't be doubted but that such his Assent is *rational*; especially if he wants Opportunity of making himself better acquainted with things of this Nature. And if a Man may give a rational Assent to, and consequently have sufficient Evidence of, a Proposition by him not comprehended, He may in *some* Instances give a rational Assent to a Proposition by him *incomprehensible*. All that is necessary in order to such a rational Assent is, that he have *some Ideas* of the Terms of the Proposition; —that he perceive *no Repugnancy* between them; and consequently, that (for any thing which appears) the Proposition may *possibly* be true: And, lastly, that he have sufficient *external Proof* to determine him rather to embrace than reject it: But in several Cases, the Authority of Persons of undoubted Skill in any particular Science is allow'd to give *such a sufficient Proof*: And therefore we may have sufficient Evidence, even from *human* Testimony, of Doctrines mysterious.

But

Christian Religion credible. 17

But whatever may be determin'd as to the Argument now produc'd, this notwithstanding must be admitted, that God can, if he pleases, *reveal* the Truth of some mysterious Propositions. That God may make some Revelation to Mankind, is as *possible* as for one Man to declare his Thoughts to another. And tho' we should not be able to frame a perfect Notion of the *Manner* how such a Revelation is made, yet we may be very sure, that in all Communications of this kind, he will afford sufficient means of distinguishing them from Delusions; and consequently, that he will give the utmost Evidence that they came from God. But, if a Revelation in general, be, in the Nature of things, *possible*, then the Revelation of a mysterious Doctrine must be so too. If it be possible for the Divine Being to give us *perfect* Conceptions of some things we knew not before, 'tis as possible for him to give us a short and *imperfect* View of them. And whenever any Doctrines of this kind are thus propos'd to us, we must have the strongest Assurance that they are *really true*; as proceeding from him, who can neither deceive nor be deceiv'd. Thus therefore, if it be possible for the Divine Being to make *any* kind of Revelation, it must be equally so to reveal the Truth of some *mysterious* Doctrines: And if this be admitted, 'tis in the Nature of things *possible* for us to have the highest Assurance of such Truths, as are by us *incomprehensible*.

3. Let us now enquire, *Thirdly*, whether there be any thing *unreasonable* in supposing that God should make a mysterious Doctrine the Matter of Revelation.

This we readily grant, that if such a Supposition implies any thing inconsistent with God's *Justice*, or *Goodness*, or *Wisdom*, it ought not on any account to be admitted : And on the other hand, we may as justly expect, that if no such Inconsistency can be made appear, then this Supposition shall be allow'd to be reasonable.

As to God's *Justice* ; As we can have no strict Claim to have any Revelation at all made to us, so neither can we, that every thing should be reveal'd to the utmost Perfection. 'Tis sufficient for us that whatever God declares must be true ; and we have no Right to be any farther inform'd concerning any Point than he pleases.

As to his *Goodness* ; Since we cannot in Justice demand any Revelation, whatever Revelation he is pleas'd to make must be the pure Issue of his *Goodness* : And 'tis no more inconsistent with this Perfection not to impart to us all those Degrees of Knowledge we may be capable of receiving, than 'tis, that he hath not bestow'd on us all that Good we may be capable of enjoying.

And, Lastly, as to God's *Wisdom* ; It is allow'd that He never does any thing without a sufficient Reason : And therefore there are doubtless very great Reasons why he hath reveal'd things to us but *in part* ; giving sufficient Evidence that some Doctrines are true, without vouchsafing us Light sufficient to clear up every perplexing Difficulty. But there may very often be sufficient Reasons, which do not *evidently appear* ; and we may have abundant Ground to think there are Reasons, which we don't see. To pronounce a thing to be *unreasonable*, 'tis not sufficient that we *don't see* the Reason of it ; we ought to discern its *Inconsistency* with some evident Reason.

son. And therefore, without distinctly accounting for the Mysteriousness of our Religion, or producing any particular Arguments why we may presume God should make it mysterious, we might demand of our Adversaries a direct Proof of the Principle they maintain; and insist on their demonstrating, that a *wise* Being cannot make a *mysterious* Point the Matter of *Revelation*.

I conceive however, we need not be so reserv'd on this Occasion; because there are several Reasons open to us, which will serve to clear up this Point. As for Instance;

If God should make any *Revelation* to Mankind, it may reasonably be expected that some part of it at least will relate to the *Perfections of his own Nature*. But these being all of them strictly *infinite*; and we being incapable of forming any *adequate* Idea of what is infinite, 'tis no Wonder if Doctrines of this Nature should be, in several respects, *mysterious*. For it is observable, that perplexing Difficulties attend all such Propositions, whose Terms imply any thing infinite; And therefore 'tis not demanded, that all Difficulties should be accounted for with respect either to *infinite Duration*, or *infinite Space*.

Again; It may reasonably be expected, that whenever such a *Revelation* is made, it will relate, in some measure, to the things of *another World*, with which we have no manner of Acquaintance. Our Ideas therefore of these things must be taken from other Ideas, with which they have some sort of *Resemblance*; which therefore not exactly representing the things they stand for, our Conceptions of them must be very *confus'd* and short. And if we shall attempt, in these Cases, particularly to explain and account

for things, we shall find ourselves as much at a Loss, as a Man born blind would be in his *Account of Colours*. But even in this Case the blind Man may have sufficient Reason to think, that others have a *distinct Sense* from what he enjoys; —that distant Objects do, by this means, produce in them a certain Sensation, which is term'd *Colour*; —that different Objects can produce *different* Sorts of such a Sensation, *i. e.* different Colours: All this, I say, he may have sufficient Evidence of, and yet have no *distinct* and *determinate* Notion either of Sight or Colours. In like manner with respect to Doctrines of Religion, we may have abundant Evidence that some things are *true*, without having any *determinate* Ideas of the things themselves.

Farther; The great End of all Divine Revelation must be, to inform us of our Duty, and to enforce the Practice of it. This will, I conceive, be easily granted me: From whence we may argue, that since our Actions are very much govern'd by the Scheme of Doctrines we entertain, it will be expedient that such *doctrinal* Truths be reveal'd, as have a *practical* Influence. These once propos'd by a Divine Authority will have the highest Evidence of Truth; and carefully attended to, will be as greatly serviceable to Virtue: And therefore there is abundant Reason why *Doctrines*, as well as Duties, should be Matter of *Revelation*. But tho' a firm Persuasion concerning such *Truths* may be conducive to this End, yet a *distinct* and *perfect* Apprehension of *all* that relates to them may be useless and unnecessary. That *Good Men shall receive Rewards in another Life*, is a strong Motive to Obedience; but to be inform'd particularly

larly *what* these Rewards shall be, and *where* dispens'd, can only gratify a Curiosity. That *the Father sent his own Son into the World, to punish Sin in his Person, and to pardon it for his Sufferings*, gives us the highest Ideas of the Divine Purity, Justice and Mercy. This Consideration, duly attended to, is the greatest Discouragement from Sinning. But to be able to solve *all* Difficulties relating to this Point; To be able exactly to account for *The Distinction between the Father and the Son; —The Generation of the Son; —The Union of the Divine and Human Natures; —The Satisfaction made by the Sufferings of Christ*, and the like, is by no means useful to this purpose. The Intention of the Gospel was to make us *Wise* indeed; but then 'twas to make us *Wise only* to Salvation. And for this Reason, it may be presum'd, so much Light hath been vouchsaf'd us as will promote this End; and all beyond it hath been with-held as unnecessary.

What farther Degrees of Knowledge may be imparted to us in another State, it will be an high Presumption to determine: because we know not particularly *what* that State will be; nor, consequently, how expedient it may prove that we should have a *distinct* View of Things. However, thus much in general the Holy Scriptures assure us, that both our *Knowledge* and Happiness will be highly improv'd; and that many of the Difficulties, with which we now perplex ourselves, shall vanish. In the mean Time, whilst we are only travelling to a better Place, let us follow the sure Guide which is given us; and not disquiet either ourselves or others, because we cannot nicely account for *every* Curiosity in the Way. Many things may
be

be true; and we may have *sufficient Evidence* that they are true, tho' attended with Difficulties. This is allow'd in Matters of *pure Reasoning*: And every Man assents to numberless Propositions which he cannot entirely clear up. Let the same Privilege be allow'd to *Religious Doctrines*: Since God may, if he pleases, reveal a thing but *in part*; and several Considerations may be assign'd why some things should be *mysterious*. I shall now under my

Third, and Last General Head, make some proper Reflexions on what hath been offer'd.

A *Christian Mystery* (agreeably to the Account before given) is a Doctrine, concerning which our Ideas are either *inadequate* or *indeterminate*: A Doctrine, which is therefore attended with Difficulties which we cannot particularly account for: And which being of itself *inevident*, and *above our Reason*, we receive purely on the Authority of the *Revealer*. I remark upon this Account, that all Attempts towards distinctly *explaining* the Mysteries of Christianity, are *unwarrantable*, and *dangerous*.

They are *unwarrantable*, because we can have no sufficient Ground on which to build such Explications. If the Doctrines, which Men attempt to explain, are, in the highest Sense, *mysterious*, then are they by us *inexplicable*; and if they are by us *explicable*, they cease to be *mysterious*. We neither do, nor can, know any thing farther concerning these Points, than what God hath been pleas'd to reveal to us: And if he hath left some Particulars relating to these Points *obscure*, they will and must remain so, notwithstanding

Christian Religion credible. 23

standing our greatest Labour spent in *explaining* them.

'Tis evident, I conceive, that we can never be sure our Explications are *true*, because we have no certain Principles to build on. But beside this 'tis worth our Notice, that it is almost infinite Odds but they are *false*. Errors are numberless, whilst Truth can be but one : And since we have nothing to direct us in such an Attempt but Fancy, we have the same Chance to pitch on *any One* of these numberless Errors, as on the Truth : And therefore by thus going beyond our Depth, we make our falling into Errors almost unavoidable.

It is true indeed, any Pains taken in fixing the *Meaning of the Words* ; in *stating the Doctrines* ; or *freeing them* from the Charge of *Contradiction*, will be usefully employ'd : Because, whatever Doctrines have been deliver'd by God, he hath given withal sufficient Means of rightly understanding them : And it is our Duty to use our best Endeavours both to understand them rightly, and to clear them from such Objections as may be urg'd against them. But to proceed farther than this ; To frame *Hypotheses* by which to *solve* Difficulties by us *insolveable*, and to *explain* things by us *inexplicable*, is (to use the softest Expression) a very extraordinary Proceeding.

But beside that Attempts of this nature are *unwarrantable*, they are in like Manner of *dangerous* Consequence. They will minister Occasion of much useless Dispute, perhaps to the Loss of Charity. Such Hypotheses being entirely *arbitrary* and without *real* Ground, 'tis no Wonder if the plausible Attempts of some be encounter'd by as plausible Schemes of others.

Thus

Thus is there a Way open'd for endless Dispute and Animosity !

Nor is it to be expected but that *Heresy* itself will spring from this Root. Unless a Man be exceeding cautious, his very Explication may be *inconsistent* with the mysterious Doctrine he explains: —Or, if it should not be evidently so, yet it may be inconsistent with some *other Doctrine* of great Moment ; —Or if he should be so happy as to keep himself clear of this, yet Occasion may be taken from some *unguarded Expressions* of propagating very *pernicious* Errors. Perhaps if it were examin'd into 'twould be found, that many Heresies have taken their Rise from hence ; and that some Great and Good Men, imprudently *trying Practices* on Mysteries, have done irreparable Mischief to that very Cause for which they were so zealous.

Let us take one Consideration more along with us. All Explications of this Nature are imaginary and without Grounds ; and it is mighty Odds but they are liable to many apparent Objections. But the Enemies of our Religion will not distinguish between the *Explication* and the *Doctrine* : And all the Inconsistencies they discover in the *one*, will be imputed to the *other*. Thus may a Doctrine be most effectually betray'd by an imprudent Defence of it.

Another Remark on what hath been deliver'd shall be this. Since the *Christian Mysteries*, I have been contending for, are Doctrines by us *incomprehensible*, and of themselves *inevident* ; The Certainty we have of their Truth must be founded on the Certainty of that *external Evidence* by which they are prov'd. Now this can be none other than an Evidence that they have been deliver'd

liver'd by God ; and may therefore be resolv'd into these Two Points : First, that the Scripture is *the Word of God*. And, in the next Place, That Such mysterious Doctrines are contain'd in Scripture. The former of these Points being suppos'd, I shall thus remark concerning the latter : — We ought not to allow that a mysterious Doctrine is contain'd in Scripture, without *plain and clear Proof* that it is so : Otherwise, we should allow such a Doctrine to be true, without plain and clear Proof that it is true. This Remark is level'd against such, as being pleas'd with nothing in Religion but *Mystery*, use their utmost Endeavours to strain and force plain Places of Scripture to a mysterious Sense.

It is, I conceive, allow'd by all sober Persons, that Scripture is to be understood in its most *obvious* Sense, unless there appear very great Reason to interpret it otherwise. For, these Writings being intended for the *general Use* of Mankind, it is reasonable to understand them in such a Sense as is *obvious* to Mankind. Besides, we ourselves object against the *Socinians*, because they decline the obvious Sense of Scripture, and have recourse to *figurative* Interpretations, purely to *avoid* Mysteries : But this strong Objection equally concludes against declining the obvious Sense in order to *introduce* Mysteries. Add to this, that if such a loose Way of interpreting Scripture be once admitted, our Religion must infinitely vary. These *figurative* Interpretations, depending entirely upon Imagination and Fancy, must be as various as are Mens different Ways of thinking. So that unless we stick to the most obvious Sense of Scripture, in

all Cases where there is not *great Necessity* of declining it, we can never maintain the *Consistency* of our Religion, nor guard against the Encroachments of *Enthusiasm*.

I remark, Lastly, that since we are to account those religious Doctrines alone *Mysterious*, which we *cannot comprehend*; therefore we are not to receive any Doctrines, under the Notion of *Mysteries*, which carry with them any plain and evident *Contradiction*: For, Such we do comprehend; at least, we have so perfect a View of them, as to see it is impossible they should be true. 'Tis upon this Ground that we reject the Doctrine of *Transubstantiation*: For, it implies in it several manifest Absurdities. The obtruding it therefore on us, under the Notion of a Mystery, is an high Affront offer'd to Religion; And serves but to expose venerable Truths to the Scoffs of Infidels.

It is true indeed, it becomes us not to pronounce hastily concerning a Doctrine, which seems to be countenanc'd by Scripture: We *may be* and often *are* mistaken in our Judgments; and, upon a deeper Search, those Difficulties vanish, which at first appear'd so formidable. However, if, after all, there *evidently appears* to be any *Contradiction* in such a Doctrine, we may conclude, that 'tis not *really* taught in Scripture; since *no Contradiction* can be true, and *no false* Doctrines can be taught by God.

It is therefore an over-pious Strain of some Good Men, who assert, that we must *deny our Reason* in Matters of Religion; and that Doctrines, however *apparently Absurd*, must be receiv'd when recommended under that sacred Name. Those who maintain this Position don't consider,

consider, that they do at the same Time overthrow the very Foundations of Religion. For, beside that it is, in itself *impossible* that a Man should be *persuaded* of the Truth of a Proposition, which he at the same time *believes* to be absurd; beside this, I say, such a denying our Reason, in *one* Point, (were it possible) must destroy the Use of it in *all others*. If a Man should be satisfied of the *Truth* of a Proposition which *appears* to him to be absurd, he might as well be satisfied of the *Falshood* of a Proposition which *appears* to him to be demonstrable. Upon this Supposition, no Arguments can be urg'd, on which securely to build our Faith.

We are indeed liable to Mistakes; and therefore (as hath been already observ'd,) ought not to be over-hasty in our Decisions: We should examine Things with the utmost Care, especially in so important a Concern as that before us. But if any Point should, after all, *appear* to be a Contradiction, 'twill be in vain to urge it as *a Matter of Faith*: For, as nothing can be *really* requir'd by God as a Matter of Faith, which is *really* a Contradiction, so we can't *presume* any thing to be such a Matter of Faith which *appears to us* to be a Contradiction. This Case therefore, as 'tis sometimes stated, *viz.* "If a Man should be *persuaded* that God has reveal'd a Doctrine, which *appears* to him to be a Contradiction, he is oblig'd to receive it as true," seems to be built on an *impossible Supposition*. For, God cannot reveal a Doctrine which is *really* a Contradiction: And since we have none other Way of judging of a Contradiction, but by its *appearing*, after due Examination, to be such to our Reason; it follows, that

that whatever *so appears* to us, we must believe is *not taught* by God; and consequently, all those Passages of Scripture which literally understood, *appear* to imply any such Absurdity, must be interpreted in a *figurative* Sense.

— To return;

Doctrines *truly* mysterious are such, at least, as (for any thing which can be prov'd to the contrary) *may* be true; and therefore, when supported by a Divine Authority, we are certain *must* be true. It follows, that our Assent to such is not a *blind*, but a *rational* Faith; as being founded on this sure Principle of Reason, that *God cannot deceive*. Here must we fix our selves: And if Men will not be persuaded, nor attend to the Deductions of that Reason, for which they would seem so zealous, 'tis in vain to argue farther. We can only refer them for fuller Conviction to the Decisions of the last Great Day.

F I N I S.

12 MR 58



BOOKS Printed for and Sold by
S A M U E L W I L M O T.

THE Nature, Possibility, and Certainty of Miracles set forth; and the Truth of the Christian Religion prov'd from thence. A Sermon preach'd before the University of *Oxford*. 3d Edit.

The Case of Subscription to Articles of Religion consider'd. A Sermon preach'd at the Triennial Visitation of the Right Reverend Father in God, *John* Lord Bishop of *Oxford*. 3d Edit.

The Penal Sanctions of Laws consider'd. An Affize Sermon preach'd before the University of *Oxford*. 2d Edit.

The Expediency of a Divine Revelation consider'd. A Sermon preach'd before the Right Honourable the Lord Mayor and Aldermen of *London*. 2d Edit.

A Defence of Reveal'd Religion against the Exceptions of a late Writer, in his Book, Intituled, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, &c. The 3d Edit.

All these by Dr. JOHN CONYBEARE.

Lately Publish'd,

Observations on Mr. *Chubb's* Discourse concerning Reason: wherein his Attempt to prove that Reason is, or ought to be, a sufficient Guide in Matters of Religion, is consider'd; and his Arguments are shewn to be frivolous and inconclusive.

A Let-

Books printed for S. Wilson

A Letter in Vindication of God's Providence
of Contingencies, upon the Principles of Reason,
against the Objections of Mr. *Fancourt*,
his late Essay on Liberty, Grace, and Prescience.
These two by Anthony Blifs, A. M. Vicar
Portsmouth.

Reform'd Devotions: Being a Collection of
the best Hymns, Prayers, and other Spiritual
Exercises, for all Occasions, composed by Di-
vines of the Church of England, and Foreign
Astericks; Bishop *Laud*, *Feally*, *Duppa*, *Whitch-
cott*, *Wettenhall*, *Cosins*, *Hamond*, *Taylor*, *Bernard*,
Scott, *Tillotson*, *Patrick*, *Kettlewell*, *Bennet*, *Thomas*,
a Kempis, *Stanhope*, *Inett*, *Hicks*, *Nelson*, *Gothair*.
The whole corrected and improv'd by *Jos. Wasse*,
Chaplain to his Grace the Duke of Kent, and
Rector of *Aynhoe* in *Northamptonshire*.

Three Sermons preach'd before the Univer-
sity of Oxford, on the Doctrine of the Trinity.
By *William Stephens*, M. A. Vicar of St. Andrew
in Plymouth, late Fellow of Exeter College in
Oxford.

12 MR 58

*The Several Heterodox Hypotheses concerning both
the Persons and the Attributes of the Godhead, justly
chargeable with more Inconsistencies and Absurdities
than those which have been groundlessly imputed to the
Catholick System.* A Visitation Sermon preach'd
at St. Andrew's in Plymouth, by *W. Stephens*,
M. A.

A Vindication of the Writers of the Old and
New Testament. By *William Louth*, B. D. Pre-
bendary of Winchester.

Youthful Lusts inconsistent with the Ministry.
A Sermon preach'd before the University of
Oxford, by *Thomas Robinson*, M. A. Fellow of
Merton College.